

## Head Pressing amongst the Milanos of Sarawak.

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With two plates.

In remote times the custom of head pressing in one form or another has been practised in many parts of the world. Nowadays however, the people who still hold to this remarkable habit are few in number and of local distribution. So far as the Malayan region is concerned, it appears to be confined to the Milanos of Sarawak, and to certain natives of Celebes. In all probability, the custom will die out amongst the Milanos at no very distant date: nevertheless at the present day a great majority of Milano women bear on their heads the unmistakable evidence of the press. A few only of the men have been thus deformed, though apparently it was at one time a privilege bestowed on all; a privilege because the press is considered to impart beauty to the subject.

The operation is performed during early infancy, the first application of the press being made when the child is only a week or two old: it is discontinued about three or four months afterwards. The apparatus employed is called a "Ja" at Mukah, an "Api" at Oya and at Bintulu a "Tadal:" the press itself is exactly the same at these three places. A "Ja" is simply a board of hard wood, shaped as in the figure, attached by strings to a T shaped piece of cloth which supports the back of the head: the central part of the wood rests upon a pad which is applied to the infant's forehead. The pad is made of folded up leaves or of cloth, and sometimes to increase its weight a flat stone or piece of wood occupies the interior of the pad. The strings which cross the board from end to end pass through a coin which is ordinarily situated at the centre of the board: by twisting the coin round and round the strings are tightened as in a tourniquet and thus the pressure on the head may be gradually increased. When applying the "Ja," the infant is taken between the legs of the father or mother and the apparatus is gently fitted over its head. At first the strings are fairly loose and the inconvenience experienced by the child is slight: after a few minutes when her offspring is asleep, the mother carefully adds to the pressure of the "Ja" by twisting the coin round a few times: this she repeats at intervals of about ten minutes until, as she judges, the maximum pressure consistent with safety is attained: when the child finally awakens, the "Ja" is removed. This operation then is conducted only during the sleeping hours of the child, commencing at about 9 a.m. and resuming again about 2 p.m.: at night time, the baby has a respite as the "Ja" demands too much trouble of the parent. It occasionally happens that too much

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pressure is exerted and the child dies, but this is a rare occurrence as the Milanos are very fond of their children and prefer to forego the pressing altogether if the child protests too much.

The most obvious result of this operation is a well marked depression of the forehead: there is presumably a corresponding uprising of other parts of the head, but being distributed more or less uniformly over the rest of the cranium this is not recognisable. Head pressed Milanos usually have a characteristic squint in both eyes and occasionally the base of the nose is depressed.

Whether this custom ordinarily affects their mental ability is not certain though some observers believe that it really has a prejudicial effect: the average Milano certainly is rather a dull person, but the same may also be said of the Land Dayaks, who have never practised head pressing.

No incantations or religious ceremonies are associated with this remarkable custom and apparently the only element therein which savours of religion is the charms which are always attached to the ja. The charm, called "Luan" by Milanos, consists of a few flakes of soot scraped off from the family cooking pot: it is sewn up with cloth into tiny packets which are attached by strings to the ja. Similar charms are in use amongst the same people in other capacities: for instance such a charm is usually to be found tied to a Bayoh (medicine man) man's drum.

In addition to the Luan every ja is provided with a large blue bead which is attached to the string that goes over the head: this bead also functions as a charm.

After it has once been used a Ja may not be given away: they are in fact kept in use through several generations. One's neighbours are very fond of borrowing a lucky ja—one which always presses well—especially if it be an old one.

This custom is now falling into disuse for the very simple reason that it involves too much trouble: nowadays the housewife has to work hard to earn a living and it is very inconvenient to have to suspend the sago working every few minutes in order to attend to a sleeping baby.

So far as is known head pressing is not practised elsewhere in Borneo. Nevertheless it should be noted that heads are often enough unintentionally deformed slightly, we believe, as a result of the very hard pillow—of wood alone—on which the infant rests when sleeping. This fact may account for a characteristic flatness often noticeable at the back of a Land Dayaks head. In north-west Celebes where the natives flatten heads and breasts the language has, according to the Rev. B. Mulder, many words in common with Milano: and moreover they have very similar fairy tales. It is therefore quite possible that the two peoples have been neighbours or even that they are related: nevertheless it is almost certain that the Milanos have lived for some—probably many—centuries in Sarawak and if there is any relationship it must have been in very remote times. The following tables give a few statistics which

have bearing on this custom. The head measurements were taken at Mukah in 1906: these measurements are alas only approximately correct as we had to content ourselves with primitive apparatus—viz large callipers.

Length of a ja 13 ins.

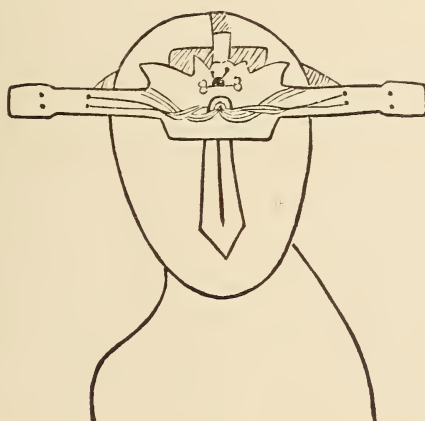
Weight of same 13 oz.

Weight of pad and contained stone 12 oz.

Head measurements of a number of young Milano women.

The length of the head was measured from the middle of the forehead: the breadth was taken at the widest part.

Length in ins.	Breadth in ins.	Length in ins.	Breadth in ins.
$6\frac{1}{2}$	$6\frac{1}{8}$	$6\frac{3}{8}$	$6\frac{3}{8}$
$6\frac{5}{8}$	$6\frac{7}{16}$	$5\frac{7}{8}$	$6\frac{1}{4}$
$6\frac{3}{8}$	$6\frac{1}{8}$	6	$6\frac{1}{4}$
$6\frac{5}{8}$	$6\frac{1}{4}$	* $6\frac{3}{4}$	* $5\frac{5}{8}$
$6\frac{1}{4}$	6	$6\frac{5}{8}$	$6\frac{3}{8}$
$6\frac{1}{2}$	$6\frac{1}{4}$	† $6\frac{5}{8}$	† $6\frac{1}{8}$
$6\frac{1}{4}$	6	$6\frac{1}{2}$	$5\frac{5}{8}$
$6\frac{1}{4}$	$6\frac{1}{4}$	$6\frac{1}{2}$	$5\frac{3}{4}$
$6\frac{3}{8}$	$6\frac{3}{8}$		



Drawing of a model made by a Milano  
to shew method of application of the Ja.

\* Subject had not been pressed.

† „ „ been slightly pressed.